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spaceship earth

A conversation with Dylan,
96.09.17 17:30.

:MISSION BREIFING

It's called _Pentastar: In the Style of Demons_, and it's the fifth official release by a band called Earth. This is the record they go commerical.

Dylan Carlson, once of Olympia, Washington, formed Earth as an outlet for his musical expression. Originally called Wormwood, he was convinced to rename his project Earth. And the first two albums (like the rest, on Sub Pop Records) were self-defininig cavernous tapestries (no _songs_) that gave him a genre all to himself -- ``ambient metal.'' Earth was basically a duo back then (the other half being Dave Harwell) with an occassional helper -- like that Kurt Cobain guy (his best friend), and ex-Melvins' Joe Preston.

Taking the traditional route toward rock stardom, the third album -- according to many -- was good, yet more `accessible.' Then came a live album and now, with _Pentastar_, Earth's a real band -- with, like, people (at least five of them). You can hear Pink Floydish keyboard segueways start and finish what are defintely _songs_. Which like to stay around the three- and four-minute range. Earth is respectable.

:INITIAL OUTBURST AND TEST TONES

He was hard to reach, cancelling our first few scheduled interviews due to filming. (Yes, there's going to be an Earth video -- for ``Tallahassee.'') On the night of our third cancelled interview, I get a call a few hours later. A crackly, low voice asks if this is Mike Stutz.

``Yeah, this is,'' I say.

``Uh, hi, this is Dylan Carlson,'' he says. ``From Earth, I just wanted to call you.''

``Oh, hey! How are you?''

``I'm fine.''

``Yeah I thought that you weren't going to be calling,'' I say.

``No.''

I'd written it off as another cancelled interview -- Dan from Sub Pop had called and said that he still couldn't get ahold of the band -- so I'd already started drinking. ``Hey, how are you?''

:NATURE OF FILM AND VIDEO

``Ok. First of all I think this is crazy -- you're gonna have a video out now,'' I say. He laughs. ``So what's it like?''

``It sort of ties in with the album cover. Instead of a green Barracuda it's a red Barracuda,'' he says. ``And sort oflike ... have you ever seen the move _The Vanishing Point_?''

``No.''

``It's about a guy who takes a lot of speed and drives a white Dodge Challenger and totally disappears ... a mixture of that and, I dunno, a bad 70s drug movie. It's like that.''

``If this video goes well, will there be more?''

``Well it's sort of like the nature of the beast, so hopefully yes.''

:PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS RELATING TO MOTIVATION

``Did this record come out how you wanted it to?''

``No record ever comes out exactly how you want it to, but it can come close. It can come close.''

``Which would you say was your best, then?''

``Our _best_ record?''

``Yeah.''

``Um,'' he says, thinking, ``well, technically I'd say this one's our best, but the one I _like_ the best would be _Phase 3_ -- just because I needed to work some stuff out associated with it, which is mostly stuff that _I_ know about, involves _me_, so I mean I guess _Phase 3_'s the most personal one. And of course the _best_ one'll always the _next_ one.''

``Yeah. Well why was _Phase 3_ the most personal?''

``I dunno, it was like a fucked up period in my life and the fact that it even got _done_, and then the fact that you know, it did so well critically, kinda made it worthwhile.''

``Did you write about any of your fucked-upedness _in_ _Phase 3_, was that what the record was about?''

``No, it was just more in how things were going and stuff.''

``That record were really good, but it was a change for you guys -- for one, the songs were a lot shorter. _Pentastar_ goes further into the video- or radio-friendly direction. Was that the intent?''

He lets out a long ``Uhh,'' and pauses. ``I mean, it influenced why we did it, but I mean -- I just hope--'' He mumbles into groans and croaks, totally incomprehensible-- ``I mean, I've never seperated the commercial aspects of making music from ... yeah I mean the commercial aspects are a part of it that you have to deal with and I've never been like, `Oh I can't make something good that won't sell.'

``Or people have this idea that if it's good or interesting or artistic its ... you know, like ...'' Again, you can't make out a word he says.

``Then did you ever have a band that you really liked, they were pretty obscure and then they got really big, alienating you from the music?''

``No,'' he says. ``No, not really. I mean, I dunno it's like I don't ... it seems to me weird to like to grudge people's success, if it's a band you like, you should be happy that they made it.''

``Yeah. So, are you invovled with any other projects?''

``Earth's it.''

``Any other music you write for personal or something else?''

``All the songs I ever wrote are on there,'' he says, and laughs. ``the exact opposite of prolific.''

:TEAM ROSTER AND CASE HISTORY EXCERPTS

``Another thing, where'd you meet all these guys in band now, like Sean and Mike?''

``Um ... yeah, actually I just knew Sean from some other people, I ran into him and ... I don't know, it's like I've known him for a few years and he's played stuff, he played with this band called the Song Catchers -- it was like made up of Indians and one of the Neville Brothers and he's played in Top 40 bands up here and stuff like that. He's always been like a working musician and he's a really good guitar player and a good friend. Mike played drums in a cover band ... like he usually plays r&b; type stuff, but I just asked him if he wanted to play.''

``Hmm.''

``It's just what happened.'' He laughs.

``Did you meet Ian at Sub Pop?''

``No, I knew him like, for about ... I've known him for a long time, since back from when I lived in Olywa. We sort of ran back into one another when he started working at Sub Pop.''

``Okay, and whatever happened to Dave [Harwell, original Earth member]?''

``Uh...'' It's one of those long pauses again, where you can tell he's thinking. ``I dunno, he just left,'' he says with a laugh. ``He never explained why.''

``Do you guys still talk?''

``Uh, no actually -- I haven't seen him in a while.''

``That sucks.''

``Sort of noone who's been through Earth and left likes me or talks to me,'' he admits, laughing.

``Did you part because of musical reasons?''

``You know, I have no idea why -- it was like a total mystery, like it just happened ...'' He has to stop himself, as if he realizes how funny he sounds, and he laughs. ``As if he's never said ... why ...''

``Right.''

``Probably other people have found out more than I do.''

``Do you ever talk to [onetime Nirvana member] Jason Everman?''

``Uh, no -- I haven't talked to him in a long time. He's a Navy SEAL now, I guess, the last I heard,'' he says, and breaks

into laughter. ``I guess he's just finally happy.''

:A PUBLIC RECITATION OF THE _BHAGAVAD-GITA_

``Is there an Earth tour coming up?''

``Um, we've been trying to get a tour but right now it's like not a lot of booking agents are taking alternative acts because there's like this glut of alternative acts right now.''

``Right.''

``Like, we've been actually having a little bit of a problem trying to get a booking agent.''

``Don't you get a lot of support from Sub Pop?''

``I mean, yes they give a lot of support in some ways, but in other ways -- I dunno, sometimes I feel like I've been on the label too long or something. I mean, its like, yeah they support me 'cause they still keep putting out Earth records,'' he says with a laugh, ``but I dunno, sometimes it's like people are excited about the record it seems, and then forget about it a week later, when they're busy pushing Sebadoh or whatever.''

``Right.''

``You know, they have to concentrate on what they think's gonna make their money back.''

``Right, and the new Sebadoh probably will.''

``Yeah.''

``But it's weird, when rockcrits talked about Earth, a lot of people didn't know who they were, but with that last record it seemed like pretty much you guys are finally getting noticed.''

``Yeah, _Phase 3_ -- it's kinda weird 'cause _Phase 3_ almost didn't get done because I was like totally fucking up at that time. And then it finally came out, and then yeah like, I dunno, the critics sorta went gaga over it.''

``Right.''

``And then, I dunno we did a show in London and did like the live record [_Sunn Amps and Smashed Guitars_] -- which I don't think was released here -- and then we did some shows in Texas and we did this apple thing in New York [the McIntosh Music Festival] and we just got back from playing Vienna, so yeah it's like -- I dunno, it's like people are like, you know, they're gettin' serious or something.''

Don't get him started on those Texas shows. They were not a good experience, even if he laughs about it now: ``It got kinda fucked up. These kids from Texas callled and you know, `Hey we want you to come down here,' and we got there and there was supposed to be five shows and there were two, and they didn't wanna pay us for the second one and we were pissed off -- I didn't even wanna _play_ for these people.''

:TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS AND MODES OF INFLUENCE

``Are you particular about your guitars or your effects when you record?''

``No. I mean it seems like anything I use I'm gonna get the sound I want. I mean this album I got to use really nice

equipment."

``Guitars?"

``I had a B.C. Rich Mockingbird for a long time and that got stolen -- this last album I did with a Paul Reed Smith."

``Those almost sound like metal band guitars."

``Yeah, basically." ``Are you kind of a metalhead?"

``Yeah, I grew up as one. I mean, like, I like metal ... yeah, I'm into metal and like classic rock," he says, laughing. ``Like, people ask me if I know all this weird music and I'm like uh, uh, uh -- like, after this one show, some guy came up to me and started asking me about all this -- I mean, I'm a_ware_ of other music, not to sound like a total moron -- but he starts talking about this like weird indie pop scene somewhere and I'm just like, "Cool it.""

``What good metal bands are there?"

``Just Slayer."

``What about all those death metal bands, like King Diamond?"

``They all suck."

``That's what I figured. What about like Christian Death?"

``Their first album's okay, but I mean, after that..."

``'Cause I heard they're still around--"

``For a long time they've been going around without any of the original members, which I mean, I dunno how they were doing _that_ -- and that first album was like way different."

``So did you hear about Van Halen reuniting?"

``Yeah."

``Did you like them better with Roth--"

``Fuck yeah!"

So I tell him about my Lollapalooza prediction -- that one of the next 'paloozas will feature the new Van Halen, Kiss in full costume, Bad Company, maybe some old metal band like Dokken, and the main headliner will be a totally reunited Led Zeppelin (well, with Bonham's son on drums). I ask, ``Would you go?"

He laughs, but he says, ``I will never ever go to a Lollapalooza, actually. I'm just bothered by everything about it. I don't like Perry Farrell, so why would I want to contribute to his crack fund?"

``Did you ever like Jane's Addiction?"

``Nope."

``Any new, `modern' bands you really love?"

``Uh modern bands -- Royal Trux, Spirtualized. Have you heard their new album?"

``Hell yeah."

``That is like _the_ best record _ever_, period."

``Then are you into the Spacemen?"

``Fuck yeah."

``I just saw Sonic Boom."

``Yeah, we just played with him over in Vienna. That was like totally rock -- and he's like such a gentleman."

``Did he explain all his analogue synths to you?''

He laughs. ``Vienna was just like totally rad, and we played with totally cool people like him and K K Nul [Japanese Zeni Geva guitarist]. It was like this weird guitar festival, they had like E.A.R. there and it was pretty cool. It was the best show we ever played, actually. We were a two piece.''

``What else do you listen to these days, the Melvins?''

``The Melvins are good. I don't really listen to him that much anymore. Actually,'' he adds with a laugh, ``I'll probably get stoned in public for saying this, but I actually like the new Green Day record.''

``I talked to Lou Barlow a few weeks ago and he said the same exact thing.''

``I _love_ that record.''

``There's this local band called 'Feek' who are really good, they've got a couple of CDs out, like fast punkrock stuff you know. I like that E.A.R. record, probably the one I listen to most recently. That's about it.''

:CURRENT TECHNIQUES AND METHODS

``How do you write your stuff -- is it improvised on the spot or composed?''

``I usually just have a couple riffs when we reach the studio and then like stuff ... I dunno, I get creative when I'm actually there -- like the knowledge that the clock's ticking and the expense inspires me to write,'' he says, laughing.

``Some of the riffs on this album almost sound like continuations of stuff off the old albums. Are they related or is it how you did it?''

``It's probably just how we did it.''

``Do you use alternate tunings?''

``Um, I usually use a drop tuning, like just basic drop _D_, and "Talahassee"'s in drop _G_, and actually on this album a lot's just in standard.''

``Do you tune to _E_ flat?''

``I only went _E_ flat on the Hendrix cover ["Peace in Mississippi"], 'cause that's how he did it.''

``Yeah, that's another thing -- what prompted you to cover that?''

He laughs and says, ``I dunno, I just thought I'd play my favorite Hendrix song, and it's kind of a chance for everyone to just play together and sorta ...''

``Jam?''

``Yeah.''

``Another weird thing about this album is the keyboards.''

``Yeah. Organ.''

``Yeah. On like the end of like the 3rd song it all sounds like part of _Dark Side of the Moon_.''

He laughs.

``Was that intentional?''

``No, I've always liked Hammonds, and there was one at

the studio, and we got the engineer guy to play it, and there it was."

``Yeah. It's crazy. What about the words, do you write the words?"

``Yeah."

``Now are they spontaneous?"

``Um, now the ones for "Talahasse" were fairly spontaneous and I had like two verses of "High Command" when we got to Hartford [where _Pentastar_ was recorded]; when we had to finish I wrote the last two verses like the night before we did it."

``How'd you pick the name? Or how'd you pick _any_ of your names, for songs and records and stuff?"

``Well, for song titles any time I hear a weird phrase or a weird phrase comes to me I write it down -- I sort of have like this book of like song titles."

``"Tibetan Quaaludes"!"

``That one was actually first called "Tequila & Quaaludes," 'cause Ian the guy that did it and I sounded like we were on tequila & quaaludes.

``That's dangerous!"

``I know. But then I decided that "Tibetan Quaaludes" would give it more mystery than "Tequila & Quaaludes." And then albums are sort of like the same thing. Like, _In the Style of Demons_, this friend of ours, Jackie, like halfway through with the record we went down to New York to visit her and we went out drinking and she came up with that. We had the one originally called _Pentastar_ because I had thought up the artwork already before we went in to do the record. And "Pentastar" is, you know, the Chrysler symbol, and I'm a Mopar fan so ... "

:SECRETS OF THE PENTA-STAR

``Do you have a Chrysler?"

``No, not yet."

``What kind do you have?"

``Right now I'm carless."

``So what kind of car do you want to get?"

There's a long pause, after which he says, ``Anything Mopar, basically."

``So you like their parts a lot?"

``Yeah. Chrysler donated some stuff for the video -- it's all Mopar stuff."

``You're crazy!"

``Well it's just `Mopar or no car,' that's it. And there's like this Mopar magazine, they've been helping us with movies and stuff that have Mopar in it."

``That's funny. You know, I think this is a 'funny' record for people who know the band."

``Yeah, this is the one. Like, this one guy who wrote all these really good reviews of the last one, this guy Patrick

Barber, all he said was, "This time around Earth's a rock band -- just what we need, another rock band," and that was it. So we might lose some of our former fans."

``Ouch. How many people interviewed you for this album?"

``I think this is the first. It's been weird, the press has been really slow, like they sent everything out to the press and then they made it seem like nothing was happening and now all this stuff it happening ... like, we're gonna get reviewed in _Rolling Stone_ and all this stuff so now its weird -- I think that now more people want to do articles and stuff."

:OBLIGATORY QUESTIONING ON NOTED SUBJECT

``You ever talk to Tom Grant?"

``Tom Grant? The name sounds familiar."

``He's that crazy investigator guy [who claims that Kurt Cobain was murdered]."

``Oh, _that_ motherfucker. Uh, no. I think he's just a dipshit. A total incompetent. I was with him for three days when he came up here. He is a total incompetent. He couldn't find his ass with a map."

``I hear someone else gave proof against his accusations. But he [Grant] wrote a little chapter about you in his Cobain `report.' You've probably seen it."

``No I haven't, actually."

``Is that like something you don't like talking about?"

``Not really, that's pretty much like `no comment,'" he says, and lets out a nervous laugh.

``Okay."

``You know, I hear every now and then -- I mean, Courtney tells me every now or then about some crazy book coming out or something, or whatever."

``Do you think about what happened a lot?"

``No. Not anymore. I could, you know -- that's whatever, over. Closed book, in my case."

``Sorry."

``Oh no."

``It's like he reinvented Christianity all over again."

``Yeah," he says, and laughs.

``Do any of your other interviewers ask you about that stuff?"

``Um, pretty much, yeah."

``Every last one of them?"

``Yeah."

``Do you ever feel cheapened about it, like it was their whole reason for interviewing you?"

``No, I mean, you can pretty much tell when it comes up, you know, in a conversation. If it's early in the conversation, yeah, but if it's late in the conversation it's pretty much because you have to."

:FINAL BREAKDOWN OF PATTERNS

``I hope you guys can come to Cleveland.''

``Yeah I wanna do a US tour really bad, so hopefully one of these records we _will_ get to do it,'' he says.

``Are your live shows the same as the record?''

``No. Never. Like this time if we tour, it'll be as a four-piece, and it'll be like just me and Ian just like this guitar kinda thing. Sometime we'll be in Cleveland. There's a review of us in the new _Magnet_ and at the end we say, `Hello Cleveland.'''

``Oh, then you _have_ to come! Who's in charge of tours at Sub Pop?''

``Pretty much bands do their own.''

``Well you have to come because there's a lot of people who love Earth in this town -- it's an Earth town, man!''

He just laughs.

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